

REPORT

The Taliban's Path After the Fall of the Panjshir Valley

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The Panjshir Valley, the mythical bastion of resistance, has fallen to the Taliban within 72 hours of its siege. So far, missing from the scene is Ahmad Massoud, son of the deceased warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, who has moved to safer ground while offering to hold talks. Following President Ashraf Ghani's footsteps, Amrullah Saleh, the former vice president of Afghanistan, has fled the country to neighboring Tajikistan aboard an Afghan Mi-17.

Surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains, the country's northeastern 34th province promised hope for anti-Taliban forces and remaining elements of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANSDF). Not only did Afghan commandoes move there with their ammunition and supplies, but also about half a dozen helicopters, three of which remain there.

“Panjshir is like a maze with dozens of valleys within the Panjshir Valley. We have retreated with our honor intact having inflicted the most casualties on the Taliban than all the other provinces combined during the war,” reads a message from the retreating National Resistance Front (NRF).

“Last night, we had to make a hard decision in the face of furious enemy attacks and depleted ammunition. Make a last stand in Bazarak and risk the total elimination of our leadership or retreat to higher ground in order to continue the resistance. We choose the latter. We are on a terrain that we know and best suits the next chapter of our resistance. We know what we are doing! This was expected!” the spokesman explains further. The NRF pledged to return to fight “after a while in order to set up supply links.” Ahmad Massoud too has reportedly sent out a similar audio message.

Provinces under the Taliban’s control surround the valley; hence, any future efforts by remnants of the NRF will face dire challenges related to the supply of weapons, man power, food, and medicines.

Neither the Soviet troops nor the Taliban until 2000 could overrun the province. Not only was the Taliban advance well-planned, but, also aptly used ethnic and political cards. Unlike the 1990s, the Taliban was not comprised only of Pashtun fighters. The campaign was led by a Tajik who was flanked by Uzbek and Pashtun men. The Taliban’s informants and sympathizers inside Panjshir Province provided it with maps and vital intelligence, besides allegedly carrying out subversive attacks. The cliched unity and control of the Massouds was weakened as some elders within were either not in favor of a conflict or objected to political figures like Amrullah Saleh who declared himself as acting president of Afghanistan in the wake of Ghani’s departure. Moreover, the Taliban’s strategy of tribal outreach seems to have delivered in Panjshir Province as well.

Though political figures have fled Afghanistan in order to raise diplomatic support for the NRF and against the Taliban, most of the key powers including Russia, China and the United States have chosen to work with the Kabul administration. The prospects of launching persistent diplomatic pressure on the Taliban and the formation of a government in exile with some degree of support within the country remain minuscule. The Karazi and Ghani governments failed to deliver good governance, but were known for corruption and incompetence.

The Taliban’s headaches are far from over though. Given the abundance of hidden ANSDF weapons caches, a new crop of anti-

Taliban fighters is likely to rise, albeit in small pockets across various provinces. Uprisings like those suppressed in Jalalabad and other smaller cities can become a more recurring phenomenon alongside peaceful protests in major urban centers. Organized foreign-funded militias are present too, which are currently in hibernation. The likes of the erstwhile Fatemiyoun, recently rebranded as Hashd al-Shia, only await instructions from Iran. Interestingly, Tehran's reaction to the fall of Panjshir has been of shock and dismay. Its [Foreign Ministry spokesman](#) stated that Iran is looking into the role of Pakistan in the Taliban's capture of the last holdout of resistance.

Until the formation of an "inclusive Islamic" government, Taliban leaders are likely to act prudently for wider recognition. The future of Afghan resistance in parts of the Panjshir Valley or elsewhere depends on the Taliban's service delivery, the performance of the economy and the degree of control over public life. Though the fall of Panjshir does come as a psychological victory for the Taliban as never in history has it controlled every part of Afghanistan, it urgently needs to resurrect a standing armed force as well as internal law enforcement agencies and intelligence services. The neighboring countries, meanwhile, prepare for an influx of refugees in the wake of an impending civil war in Afghanistan, which was also hinted at by a US military commander.



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